

EASTERN CHRISTIAN ASCETIC IDEAL OF “MOURNING” (*PENTHOS*) AND THE *ATMANUTHAPAM* OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

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Abstract: Compunction of the heart is an ascetic ideal practised both in the East and the West to reach the monastic way of perfection. The present article attempts to understand this Eastern ascetic ideal in the life and works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, especially in *Atmanuthapam*. The ascetic and monastic movements were started both in Egyptian desert and in the Syriac Orient to flee away from the corrupted and corrupting world and to mourn for the sins of the self and of others. In the Syriac tradition anchorites were called ‘mourners’ (*‘abīlē*). Different spiritual authors are witnesses to this ascetic ideal of compunction of the heart both in the desert and in the Syriac traditions. Kuriakose Elias Chavara follows the tradition of compunction of the soul. His spiritual work *Atmanuthapam* is a witness to it.

Keywords: East Syriac Tradition, *Penthos*, Compunction of the Heart, Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Metanoia*, *Catanyxis*, *Iḥidāyā*, *‘abīlā*, Mourners, *Ruhānūtā*, Ascetic ideal, Spirituality

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1. Introduction

Asceticism is a transformative path toward the union with the divine both in the East and in the West. Asceticism became a mass movement in the East, especially in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts and its east in the 3rd and 4th century, which we later called monasticism. At the heart of Eastern Christian asceticism lies the profound ideal of “compunction of the heart/soul” – remorse and mourning over the past sins. This concept, deeply rooted in the spiritual and monastic traditions, is one of the important ascetical ideals in the spiritual progress, leading to deep repentance, humility, and a transformative journey toward the Divine. Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871) is a modern ascetic and monk in Kerala, India, in the Thomas Christian (present Syro Malabar) tradition, which is part of the larger East Syriac tradition. Deep repentance and compunction marked his spirituality, and his work *Atmanuthapam*¹ aptly present this theme in a vivid way. In this article, we try to explore the eastern Christian ascetic ideal of “compunction of the heart” and the resulting “mourning” and tears in the desert fathers and Syriac spiritual writers very briefly in order to understand the compunction of the soul in the spirituality of Chavara. First of all, let us understand the concept of mourning in the Eastern Christian ascetical literature briefly and then examine it in the *Atmanuthapam* of Kuriakose Elias Chavara.

2. Terms and Concepts

Compunction (of the heart/soul) is an ascetic ideal in the Eastern Christian spirituality. We here briefly describe the terms used in order to get an idea of their use in the Eastern Christian ascetical literature. The third beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount can be considered the biblical basis of compunction: “Blessed are those who mourn (πενθουντες/ܡܬܝܬܝܢ), for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4).

Penthos (πένθος) is the Greek word (or its derivatives) that the spiritual authors used in their writings to denote compunction. *Penthos* means grief, sorrow (from *pentheo*, means bewail, lament, mourn) etc.² According to the linguists, this word has the same origin/root with the words *pathos* (πάθος), meaning suffering, passion, etc., (though it is not

¹ *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, vol. 2, translated by Mary Leo, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1989. Quotations from the *Atmanuthapam* used in this article are taken from this translation.

² Liddle-Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edition with a revised supplement, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 1360.

its primary meaning), and *apatheia* (ἀπάθεια) means passionlessness,³ an ascetic ideal in the East. According to I. Hausherr "a synonym, or nearly that, of *penthos* is *catanyxis* (κατάνυξις)." ⁴ But this word is more of "that pricking of the heart, or conscience, which acts as a catalyst to repentant thoughts and deeds. It is an essential component of the whole process of mourning for sin, and may be distinguished from *penthos* in that it tends to refer to a particular moment of awakening, the physical sensation of the heart being pricked, whereas mourning is more of a continuous movement."⁵

In the Syriac ascetic literature the common word used for mourning/sorrow is 'abīlūtā/'abīltā (ܐܒܝܠܘܬܐ/ܐܒܝܠܬܐ, from the root ܐܒܠ, means 'to mourn').⁶ The one who is a mourner is called 'abīlā (ܐܒܝܠܐ) and in the Syriac tradition such a person is an ascetic or a monk (*iḥidāyā*).

Atmanuthapam (ആത്മാനുതാപം), is the Malayalam word (from Sanskrit) used by Kuriakose Elias Chavara to denote the compunction of the soul/self, and it is a composite word. *Ātma* is self or soul or even spirit. *Anuthāpam*, which itself is a composite word of *anu* (after, following, under) + *thāpam* (heat) is the word used for repentance or remorse.⁷ *Anuthāpam* is the intense heat emanated from the depth of the self by remorse to the unholiness, i.e., sin.

Penthos/'abīlūtā'/compunction is a necessary practice in the ascetic life. According to Hannah Hunt, it is a process than a state in the spiritual life:

³ "It [*apatheia*] is not an attitude of passive indifference and insensibility, still less a condition in which sinning is impossible, but it is on the contrary a state of inner freedom and integration, in which we are no longer under the domination of sinful impulses, and so are capable of genuine love." Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?" in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, Oxford: OUP, 1998, 12.

⁴ Irénée Hausherr, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East*, translated by Anselm Hufstader, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982, 7.

⁵ Hannah Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief: Tears of Contrition in the Writings of the Early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers*, Leiden: Brill, 2004, 16.

⁶ See, J. Payne-Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1903, 2.

⁷ See, V.S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, vol. 1, edited by P.K. Gode and C.G. Karve, revised edition, Poona: Y.G. Joshi, 1957, 88-89, 94.

Penthos is a process, not a static condition. It is the remorse of the sinner as much as the charism of the perfected spiritual athlete. In the life of the mourner, godly grief—as opposed to its more secular form—expresses a Trinitarian dynamic. It is prompted by the movement of the Spirit within the heart of the mourner; its living out enables him or her to participate in the sufferings of Christ; it restores the penitent to kinship with the Father.⁸

There is no moving forward to the spiritual perfection without the penitential attitude and the resulting compunction.

3. *Metanoia* and Compunction - Biblical Basis

The concepts of *metanoia* and compunction play a vital role in the narratives of the conversion stories of individuals in the Bible. *Metanoia* and compunction are not two complete different concepts, but at times, they are used interchangeably, though there are subtle differences. Rooted in the Old and New Testaments, these ideas form the foundation for understanding the transformative nature of redemption and the pursuit of a deeper relationship with the divine.

3.1. *Metanoia*: A Change of Mind and Heart

The Greek term *metanoia* (μετάνοια)⁹ in the New Testament, means ‘to change one’s mind,’¹⁰ is often translated as “repentance.” However, it is more than mere remorse or sorrow for sins. *Metanoia* implies a profound shift in one’s thinking and a corresponding change of heart. This biblical term involves turning away from sin and embracing a new direction aligned with God’s will, a complete turn-around to God.

The concept of *metanoia* is rooted in the Old Testament,¹¹ where prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah called upon the people to turn away from their sinful ways and return to God. Isaiah 55:7 captures this sentiment: “Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.” Throughout the Bible this turnaround and repentance is portrayed as a pathway to restoration and reconciliation with God. Psalm 51, attributed to David after his sin with

⁸ Hannah Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief*, 3.

⁹ See, TDNT 4: 980-89, 999-1006.

¹⁰ G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961, 855-858.

¹¹ The Hebrew word *shûb* (means to turn around, return etc.) used in the OT can be considered equivalent to the concept of *metanoia*. See, TDOT 14: 461-522.

Bathsheba, is a heart-breaking expression of repentance. In verse 10, David pleads, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." His plea captures the essence of repentance—a longing for inner transformation and renewed communion with the divine.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist heralds the message of *metanoia* as he prepares the way for the coming of Messiah. In Mathew 3:2, he declares, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This call to *metanoia* sets the stage for Jesus' ministry, emphasizing the transformative power of a changed mind and heart. First proclamation of Christ (Mt 4:17) is also the same. The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 further illustrates the theme of *metanoia*, which Kuriakose Elias Chavara illustrates also in his *Atmanuthapam*. The wayward son, having squandered his inheritance, returns to his father in humility and remorse. The father's response reflects the mercy and grace awaiting those who turn back to God. The parable highlights the transformative power of repentance, portraying it not as a burdensome obligation but as a liberating journey back to the Father's embrace.

We understand that repentance is the turning point in the spiritual journey. Repentance, almost same as *metanoia*, involves acknowledging and confessing sins, accompanied by a genuine desire to have a change. It signifies a turning point in the spiritual journey, a deliberate choice to forsake the ways of the world and embrace a life in accordance with God's ways.

3.2. Compunction: Sorrow that Leads to Transformation

Compunction (πένθος),¹² often synonymous with the sorrow related to contrition, refers to a deep sense of remorse and grief for one's sins and often leads to tears. It goes beyond the surface-level guilt, including a heartfelt recognition of the gravity of one's sins. In the biblical context, compunction is an essential component of genuine repentance. According to Bultmann it is the "passionate grief which leads to corresponding action."¹³

The story of King David serves as a vivid example of compunction leading to conversion. After having committed the adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, when confronted by the

¹² See, TDNT 6: 40-43.

¹³ TDNT 6: 42.

prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12:1-15), David's heart is pierced with compunction. Psalm 51, attributed to this moment, expresses the depth of his contrition. Verse 17 declares, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." David's compunction becomes a catalyst for repentance and, ultimately, for the restoration of his relationship with God.

The Apostle Peter's journey also exemplifies the transformative power of *metanoia*, repentance, and compunction. Despite his bold declaration of loyalty to Jesus, Peter denies him three times during Jesus' trial. The weight of his betrayal hits Peter with deep compunction, leading to tears of genuine remorse (Mt 26:75). Later, after the resurrection, Jesus reinstates Peter, asking him three times, "Do you love me?" (Jn 21:15-17). Each time, Peter responds affirmatively, and Jesus commissions him to feed His sheep. Peter's journey from denial to restoration exemplifies the redemptive path of *metanoia*, repentance, and compunction. The Apostle Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, writes about the transformative nature of godly sorrow. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, he states, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." Here, Paul distinguishes between two types of sorrow – worldly sorrow that leads to despair and death, and godly sorrow that results in repentance and salvation.

Compunction, with its emphasis on deep sorrow for sin, challenges the superficiality of remorse and guilt. It calls one to confront the gravity of their transgressions and approach God with a contrite heart. The Apostle Paul's distinction between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow serves as a guide, reminding everyone that a transformative sorrow leads to repentance and salvation.

3.3. Compunction and Tears

Compunction leads to tears. The sinful woman at the feet of Jesus, and Peter after the denial of Jesus are examples from the NT. The Woman with the Alabaster Jar (Lk 7:36-50), an unnamed woman with a sinful reputation approaches Jesus during a meal. Overwhelmed with compunction, she weeps at Jesus' feet, washing them with her tears and anointing them with costly perfume. Jesus acknowledges her genuine repentance, stating, "Your sins are forgiven" (Lk 7:48). This touching moment illustrates how compunction, expressed through tears, opens the door to divine forgiveness and redemption.

Another compelling example is Peter's denial of Jesus during His trial (Mt 26:69-75). As Peter realizes the gravity of his betrayal, he experiences compunction, and the Gospel of Mathew records, "And he went out and wept bitterly" (Mt 26:75). The tradition witnesses that later in his life whenever he heard the cockcrow he wept over his denial of the master. Peter's tears symbolize not only his deep remorse but also the beginning of a transformative journey that leads to his restoration by Jesus after the resurrection.

4. Compunction in the Desert Fathers

Compunction of the heart is a constant theme of discussion in the sayings of the desert fathers (*Apophthegmata Patrum*). According to them compunction and weeping over the sin could be considered a monk's constant occupation.¹⁴ It is the way for an ascetic one to avoid sin and purify his or her heart: "A brother asked Abba Poemen, 'What can I do about my sins?' and the old man said to him, 'Weep interiorly, for both deliverance from faults and the acquisition of virtues are gained through compunction. He also said, 'Weeping is the way that Scripture and our Fathers have handed on to us.'"¹⁵

One can weep only while living in this world. Those who do not weep in this world will weep eternally in the next world:

It was said of him [Abba Arsenius] that he had a hollow in his chest channelled out by the tears which fell from his eyes all his life while he sat at his manual work. When Abba Poemen learned that he was dead, he said weeping, 'Truly you are blessed, Abba Arsenius, for you wept for yourself in this world! He who does not weep for himself here below will weep eternally hereafter; so it is impossible not to weep, either voluntarily or when compelled through suffering.'¹⁶

Compunction is actually a gift from God. "A brother questioned Abba Matoes saying, 'Give me a word.' He said to him, 'Go, and pray God to put compunction in your heart, and give you humility.'"¹⁷ According to Abba Poemen, it is also a spiritual protection: "Compunction has two

¹⁴ Graham Gould, *Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, 129. See the note 97.

¹⁵ Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984, 195. Cf. also saying 119 on page 184.

¹⁶ Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 18.

¹⁷ Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 145.

sides: it is a good work and a good protection."¹⁸ One cannot become a monk without acquiring compunction.¹⁹

According to Evagrius Ponticus, who had a profound influence on later Greek and Syriac spiritual authors, compunction is a predisposition for pure prayer. In his *Chapters on Prayer*, nos. 5-8, he discusses this notion. For example no. 5-6 says: "Pray first for the gift of tears so that by means of sorrow you may soften your native rudeness. Then having confessed your sins to the Lord you will obtain pardon for them. Pray with tears and your request will find a hearing. Nothing so gratifies the Lord as supplication offered in the midst of tears."²⁰ Commenting and summarizing on the Evagrius' discussion on the tears related to pure prayer, Robert E. Sinkewicz says:

Evagrius proposes that the monk pray first for the fundamental disposition of compunction manifested in the gift of tears. Tears thus arise from a profound awareness of one's weakness and sinfulness, together with the acknowledgement of one's dependence on God's forgiveness and gracious assistance. Tearful compunction is then a remedy for the soul's 'wildness,' that is, its propensity to be moved towards anger; further, it instils an attitude of humility that preserves the monk from the dangers of pride and the mental imbalance to which it can lead.²¹

Evagrius differentiates godly sadness and demonic sadness reminding us of the distinction given by St Paul (2 Cor 7:10). "Demonic sadness darkens the soul and may arise either with no apparent cause or from some unusual cause. Godly sadness, in contrast, calls the soul to repentance in tears, reminding it of death and subsequent judgement. The repentance of godly sadness eventually gives way to spiritual joy with its acceptance of death and judgement."²² And Evagrius reminds the ascetics, "Do not forget that you have fallen, even if you have repented, but hold on to the memory of your sin as an occasion of

¹⁸ Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 172. Cf. also the second saying of Abba Peter the Pionite on page 201.

¹⁹ Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 177.

²⁰ Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos, Chapters on Prayer*, translated by John Eudes Bamberger, CSS 4, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981, 56.

²¹ Robert E. Sinkewicz, tr., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford: OUP, 2003, 186.

²² Introduction in Robert E. Sinkewicz, tr., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford: OUP, 2003, 25. Cf. *Antirrhetikos* 4.74; *Eulogies* 7.

compunction that leads to your humility, so that thus humbled you will by necessity disgorge your pride."²³ Later Greek spiritual writings like *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*²⁴, *Philokalia*²⁵, etc., also treat this subject very elaborately.

5. Compunction on the Way to Perfection in the Syriac Tradition

Repentance and compunction are recurring themes in the Syriac ascetic and spiritual tradition ever since the Proto-monastic²⁶ period. The Proto-monastic tradition of the Syriac East (2-4 c.) was an ascetic movement contemporary (or earlier?) to the Egyptian desert monastic tradition. In Egypt, Antony (+356) was considered the father of monasticism. But in the Syriac tradition, such prominent figures were not known, though Julian Saba²⁷ (+367) was surely one among them who organized monastic community in the Syrian desert. The Syriac father Aphrahat (+345), a senior contemporary of Ephrem the Syrian (+373), was a witness to the proto-monasticism.²⁸ Writings of Ephrem and the ascetic writing *Liber Graduum* (*The Book of Steps*) also dealt with this theme in the 4th century. For example the 18th *memra* of *Liber Graduum* deals on prayer with tears. Later monastic/ascetic authors like John the Solitary [of Apamea] (5th C.), Philoxenos of Mabbug (+523), Isaac of Nineveh (+700), Joseph Hazzaya (b. 710), and John Dalyatha (+780) also dealt this theme constantly.

²³ *Eulogies* 14. Robert E. Sinkewicz, tr., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford: OUP, 2003, 40.

²⁴ For example, the 7th step of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* of John Climacus (+649) exclusively treats this subject.

²⁵ It is a collection of the writings of many spiritual authors and fathers of the Church. See, G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, ed. and tr., *The Philokalia*, 5 vols., London: Faber and Faber, 1979-2020.

²⁶ For a study on the (Proto) Monasticism in the Syriac tradition, see, Shafiq AbouZayd, *Iḥidayutha: A Study of the Life of Singleness in the Syrian Orient: From Ignatius of Antioch to Chalcedon 451 A.D.*, Oxford: ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies, 1993.

²⁷ Joseph Patrich, *Sabas, Leader of Palastinian Monasticism: A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995.

²⁸ His 6th Demonstration on *Bnay/Bnat Qyama* (Sons/Daughters of the Covenant), an ascetic group in this tradition, is an example.

5.1. Compunction and Tears in the Syriac Ascetical Way

Compunction with tears is part of the ascetical way of life and early Syrian monks are not an exception. Theodoret of Cyrrhus (+466) in his *History of the Monks of Syria*²⁹ gives many instances of compunction with tears. For example, he mentions of a monk called Marcianus, who was “glorious in every virtue and always shedding tears of compunction.”³⁰ Another monk who lived in the Syrian desert, called Theodotus, “night and day he poured forth tears of compunction.”³¹ About Amma Domnina’s constant tears, Theodoret Comments: “For it is fervent love for God that begets these tears, firing the mind to divine contemplation, stinging it with pricks and urging it on to migrate from here.”³²

In the east of the Syrian deserts bloomed many ascetic and monastic individuals and communities, in Edessa, Nisibis and the East of Euphrates, depicting a clear and distinct ascetical way in the Syriac tradition. Christian asceticism is basically a going away from the corrupted and corrupting world, and do penance for one’s own sins and the world. Compunction and tears are part of this penance and the spiritual authors often deal with them for the benefit of other ascetics and monks. For example, *Liber Graduum* describes the mournful tears of prayer in its 18th *memra*:

There are tears that come from sadness and tears that come from joy. As our Lord said, ‘You shall weep and mourn and grieve, and the world will rejoice; but later your tears shall be changed to joy’ (Jn 16:20). A person weeps on account of his sins and he [thus] acts well, as it is written, ‘Sorrow on account of God is remorse that leads to life’ (2 Cor 7:10). There are some who have defeated sin, and have transcended sins and have done good deeds, weeping with joy on account of their love for their Lord who has dealt very kindly with them and has removed them from the servitude of death and made

²⁹ See a recent study on this work: Sunil M. Alexander, *The Concept of Iḥidāyā in Theodoret’s A History of the Monks of Syria: A Study in Comparison with the Ancient Egyptian Monasticism*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 2023.

³⁰ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, translated by R.M. Price, Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1985, 44.

³¹ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 61.

³² Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 187.

them free because they have lowered themselves and have kept his commandments.³³

Generally in the later early Syriac ascetical and spiritual tradition the way of perfection is divided into three: levels of body (*pagrānūtā*), soul (*naphšānūtā*) and spirit (*ruhānūtā*). Compunction of the soul can be considered part of the second level, level of the soul. John the Solitary [Apamea] says:

I will begin by speaking about compunction of soul, in which of the three levels it is found. It is not at the level of the body, nor at the level of the spirit. It is not in people at the level of the body because their reflection is evil. It is not at the level of the spirit because joy elevates them above this suffering. But compunction of soul is only/among those at the level of the soul because the one at the level of the body is moved by the fear of God which leads him to grieve over his deeds; and from sorrow for his sins is born compunction of soul.³⁴

For Isaac of Nineveh also "Tears are to the mind the sure distinction between the bodily and the spiritual state, between the state of aperception and that of purity."³⁵

5.2. Sweet Tears: A Sign of a Burning Heart and Pure Prayer

Compunction and tears of repentance will lead to higher levels spirituality, may be in the Syriac spiritual path of perfection, the level of the spirit (*ruhānūtā*). This is a movement from the attitude of repentance to the humility and wonder emanating from the infinite love and mercy of God. Here, according to Isaac of Nineveh, "a fervent heat burns in the heart and ineffable joy arises in the soul. Further, sweet tears moisten the cheeks; spiritual exultation makes the mind drunk; inexplainable consolations are received by the soul; hope supports the heart and strengthens it. Then it is to him as if he dwelt in heaven..."³⁶ According to Sahadana (Martyrius), "if the commencement of our prayer is wakeful and attentive, and we wet our cheeks with tears which stem from the

³³ *Liber Graduum* 18.1. *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum [Ktābā d-masqātā]*, translated by Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F.G. Parmentier, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2004, 177.

³⁴ *John the Solitary on the Soul*, translated by Mary T. Hansbury, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013, 36.

³⁵ *Mystic Treatises of Isaac of Nineveh [Part I]*, translated by A.J. Wensinck, Amsterdam: Uitgave der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923, 164.

³⁶ *Mystic Treatises of Isaac of Nineveh*, 372.

emotion of our hearts, then our prayer will be made perfect in accordance with God's wish; being without blemish, it will be accepted in his presence, and the Lord will be pleased with us and have delight in our offering."³⁷ This pure prayer is the most delightful offering to God. This type of genuine prayer, according to Shimeon d-Taybuthe, "which issues from a pure mind so refines the heart that groans and tears of joy involuntarily flow forth, and the soul stretches itself out towards God. Blessed is that soul which has tasted its sweetness."³⁸ Joseph Hazzaya "On the Stirrings of the Mind in Prayer" says:

Every time they [immaterial impulses consist in the hidden spiritual knowledge] are revealed to the mind during prayer, they give a sweet taste to the mind's palate, like honey-comb, and they kindle all the faculties of both soul and body with their warmth, so that *tears* without measure pour down from a person's eyes whenever these impulses are set in motion in his mind. These are not *tears* stemming from the passions or from sorrow because of wrongdoing, but rattier they arise from joy and delight, and from a sense of wonder at God's creation, His compassion and care for everything - at how His compassion is poured out abundantly over us human beings ... being continuously raised up with Him in an understanding of His mysteries and in the glorious vision of Him.³⁹

Remembering God's greatness, love and mercy, one's mind is stirred and heart is burned, and the prayer in this state is pure and acceptable to God. This is also one of the signs of the Holy Spirit working in you:

The third sign of the working of the Spirit within you consists in the kindness which represents within you the image of God, through which, when your thoughts extend to all people, tears flow from your eyes like fountains of water, as if all people were dwelling in your

³⁷ Sahadona, *Book of Perfection*, 2.8.20. Translation by Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987, 210-211.

³⁸ Translation in: Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012, 142.

³⁹ Translation in: Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 148-149.

heart, and you affectionately embrace them and kiss them, while you pour your kindness on all.⁴⁰

When one embraces the whole humankind (and the creation) in his heart by the power of the Holy Spirit "goodness and kindness are born in your heart, so that you do not utter anything unkind to anyone, nor does your thought think evil of anyone, but you do good to all people, both in your thought, and in your actions."⁴¹

5.3. Ascetic/Monk as a "Mourner" ('*abīlā*)

In the Syriac tradition, an ascetic/monk (*iḥidāyā*⁴²) is also called a 'mourner' ('*abīlā*') because of his/her constant life in compunction and tears. According to Arthur Vööbus, Syriac monasticism is against laughter of monks, but their basic attitude is sadness and mourning.⁴³ So they are called '*abīlā*' (mourner):

He [Ephrem] assures them that this sorrow is the sign of perfection in the Christian life. This is the '*abīlūtā*', in the hymns of Severus called 'the blessed sadness,' according to which the monks were called '*abīlē*'. In ascetic understanding, this was identified with the genuine symptoms of true piety. Under this '*abīlūtā*', the Syrian monks did not understand a mere psychological disposition without concrete outward and physical signs. On the contrary, it was supposed that a genuine fright at the thought of punishment must be so intense that the heart is pierced with such vehemence that the inner pain and affliction find a vehicle in tears ... Sadness and mourning were inseparable connected with weeping.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Abdisho [Joseph] Hazzaya, *Book of Questions*, translated in *Early Christian Mystics*, edited by Alphonse Mingana, Woodbrooke Studies 7, Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1934, 166.

⁴¹ *Early Christian Mystics*, 166.

⁴² The Syriac word *iḥidāyā* (ܝܚܝܕܝܝܐ) means single, only-begotten, solitary, etc. See, J. Payne-Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 191. Christ is the *iḥidāyā*, the Only-Begotten of the Father. Those who follow Christ the solitary single-mindedly are also *iḥidāyē*. Generally ascetics and monastics are known as *iḥidāyē* in the Syriac tradition. The Greek word *monos* (the word *monachos* comes from this root) has the same sense and meaning.

⁴³ Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, vol. 2, CSCO 197, Subsidia 17, Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1960, 281-283.

⁴⁴ Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 2:283.

For example, St Symeon the Stylite was known as the 'chief of the mourners.' The author of the life of St Symeon gave the title of his life as "Heroic Deeds of Mar Symeon, Chief of the Mourners" (*يحيى نبيس دمار*),⁴⁵ though its translator, Frederick Lent, puts it as "The Heroic Deeds of Mar Simeon, the Chief of the Anchorites."⁴⁶

6. *Atmanuthapam* of Kuriakose Elias Chavara

Atmanuthapam is one of the main works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. This is both a literary and spiritual work in Malayalam, the language of Kerala, India. The exact date of its composition is not known, but it is believed that it was composed during the last years of the author's earthly life at Koonammavu. A part of it was published together with the author's biography by Fr Leopald Beccaro OCD, the spiritual father of Chavara, on the year of Chavara's death in 1871. The title of the work was *The Concise Biography of the Saintly Soul who Wrote these Devotional Poems*.⁴⁷

This poetical work has fourteen cantos/chapters. Among these the last two cantos are very short ones. The first two cantos comprise mostly autobiographical illustrations of the author, which contains the materials related to compunction. Chapters 3 to 8 are illustration of the life of Christ, where we see an attitude of a penitent, especially when he illustrates Infant Jesus and the passion of Christ. The Chapters 9 to 13 illustrate the life of Mother Mary from the moment she stood under the Cross till her death, and the last chapter is a concluding prayer to Mary. Mary's life was taken from a Spanish mystic of 17th century, namely, Sr Mary of Jesus Ágreda's, *Mystical City of God*.⁴⁸

7. Compunction in *Atmanuthapam*

The basic attitude of *Atmanuthapam* is "compunction," as the name of this work indicated. The author pours out his heart to the heavenly

⁴⁵ *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, vol. 4, edited by Paul Bedjan, Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894, 507.

⁴⁶ Frederick Lent, tr. "The Heroic Deeds of Mar Simeon, the Chief of the Anchorites," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 35 (1915), 111. For a study on the *abiluta* of St Symeon, see, Hannah Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief*, 171-223.

⁴⁷ *The Complete Works of Father Chavara* [Malayalam], vol. 2, edited by Z.M. Moozhoor, 3rd Edition, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 2014, xi.

⁴⁸ For an English translation of the work *Mistica Ciudad de Dios, Vida de la Virgen María*, see, Mary Agreda, *Mystical City of God*, 4 vols, translated by Fiscar Marison, Hammond, IN: W.B. Conkey Company, 1902.

Father, Jesus Christ and Blessed Virgin Mary, and he does it with a genuine compunction of heart.

7.1. Reasons for Compunction

Compunction and tears are indications of spiritual growth and transformation of the person. It could be considered 'godly grief.' Reasons for this redemptive grief in *Atmanuthapam* is discussed here very shortly.

7.1.1. Holiness/Greatness of God the Father and His Son Jesus

God's holiness and greatness is one of the reasons for the awareness of human lowliness and sinfulness. In the vision of Isaiah (Is 6:1-7) on heaven where God enthroned and the Seraphs sing thrice "Holy" he was well aware of his own unholiness and lowliness, and uttered: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" The attitude of Chavara is almost the same.

Creator and creation are completely two different levels of being. Almighty God in his loving kindness created him and sustained him. Chavara starts his work mentioning this fact:

God almighty, who WAS in the beginning
You created me, a son of Adam
O God, wherefore this grace, reveal to me
O Lord eternal, your infinite mercy. (1.1-4⁴⁹)

God is "omnipotent" (1.9), "perfect" (1.13), "boundless mercy" (1.12, 29), "Holy Lord" (1.29), "sea of Mercy, mighty depth unfathomed" (1.30), "fount of mercy" (1.33) and "you, my Lord and my God" (1.37). "You [God] created me" (1.18), "granted me a guardian spirit" (1.19), "shield me from dangers" (1.22), "beside me each passing moment to guide and guard me" (1.23-24). "Through your sole mercy" you "send forth your son" and made a covenant with us (2.167-68), and made him our "elder brother" (2.169-72). "You, my loving Father, aware of my lot, draw me close to your beloved Son" (4.201-203). In the presence of this infinite love and greatness, Chavara feels his utter lowliness and sinfulness.

⁴⁹ Citation here as 1.1-4 means Canto/Chapter 1, lines 1 to 4 of *Atmanuthapam*. The English translation (used here) often misses the beauty (and at times meaning) of Chavara's work in its original language.

For Chavara Jesus is the "Fount of Mercy" (7.477), "My God, my love, my master" (8.1), "the blessed Bridegroom" (8.105), and "my master, my lord, my king" (8.106). He is the "Son incarnate in Mary's purest womb" (1.72), "God of love and goodness" (1.99), "Lord of Mercy" (2.1), "boundless love" (2.61), "my almighty God, Supreme" (2.62), "You my love, my joy, and my good fortune" (2.143) and how can I live without you, "my very breath, my food, my drink" (2.144-45). He is the "fount of virtue, God of all creation, wedded to kindness eternal, giver of peace," and "a being immortal, infinite great" (2.159-60), became "poorest of poor, a prince of dire poverty in a filthy manger, wrapt in swaddling clothes" (2.201-202). "O God-man, my master, seat of mercy, Lord, look with eyes of pity on me a sinner" (2.241-42). With the awareness of the greatest mercy of God towards him, Chavara is full of gratitude and at the same time remorse for his sinfulness.

7.1.2. Innumerable Blessings Received in Life

Chavara received numerous blessings from God in his childhood, and the very thought of them makes him grateful to God for His greatness and at the same time they are the cause of compunction when he thinks of his ungratefulness to God: "You moulded truly great in your likeness" (1.10), "He gave me a mother, though "frail," but "a sleepless angel, vigilant" etc. (1.25-28), "gave me parents grounded in faith" (1.43), "faith engraved in me" deeply (1.44), "gave me a mother to feed me" (1.45), a mother "to shield me from pain and sorrow and tend me," and "to pour that tender love you filled her with" (1.46-47), a praying mother even in the long hours of night and with milk she filled him with thoughts of heaven and words of grace (1.49-50). God cleansed him through his grace of baptism (1.33-36), through "your wondrous gifts of mercy and love cleanse my soul and it became holy, spotless and fair" (1.38-39), "through baptismal grace you made me your cherished son" (1.41), "showed me heaven's joys to tend me grow" (1.42), "he called me back from [filth] and sowed in me a sacred seed of wisdom" (1.114-115), and vocation to priesthood (1.116-140). In Pallipuram, Malpan Thomas Palackal ("leader priest") received him, "nourishing his soul, he was tutored in paths of virtue, to assist the Holy Mass, gently taught to tread the ways of holiness, to shun all evils that would retard his onward march" (1:135-140). Further blessings he received in the subsequent years and his ungratefulness are remembered in the following chapters of *Atmanuthapam* and asks for forgiveness with a tearful heart. Chavara's life in the following years up to his death was a marching towards holiness and perfection through the practice of asceticism and charity.

7.1.3. Love of God the Father and the Saviour Jesus Christ

Chavara's love of God is often found overflowing in most of his works. He addresses and invokes the heavenly Father as "*Ente Appa* [my (dear) father/dad]", especially in his *Dhyanasallapangal* (Colloquies with the Heavenly Father), which also expresses the remorse to sin and compunction of the heart and deep filial love towards the heavenly Father.

Through these colloquies Chavara expresses the deepest feelings in spiritual life: gratitude to a loving God for all the abundant blessings showered on him and sorrow for the smallest lapses in personal life. His most intimate feelings reveal his childlike innocence. He continuously addresses God and Jesus Christ *Appa* ('father'), *Ente Appa* ('my father'), which has the endearing and intimate meaning of 'father' reserved exclusively to the children ... Though the soul may be sunk in remorse the father-son relation lifts it to sublime heights. So his spirituality ever remains lofty, being absolutely free from any feeling of inferiority.⁵⁰

Before his loving heavenly Father, he stands like a prodigal son: "Your boundless love," no other reason [saved me from death] (2.61), "You [are] my love, my joy, my good fortune" (2.143), and "how can I live without you, my very breath, my food, my drink" (2.144-45). Even at times Chavara calls Christ as father: "Alas, my father, my creator, my Lord, in utter shame I bend down my head" (7. 334-35), "like a father, patiently followed my trail, whispered unto my heart 'You are my love'" (7.343-44), but "I pierced your [Christ's] palms, punched you by nails, tore your tender flesh through sin" (7.229-32) and "when I discover I am but a worm, worse even than they, I tremble with fear and woe" (7.349-50). His ardent love for the heavenly father and the Lord Jesus Christ is the reason for his acute remorse and compunction. His ardent desire to see (*darśan*⁵¹) the divine in its various forms comes from this love of God. The third canto of *Atmanuthapam* expresses this passionate longing.

⁵⁰ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 369-370.

⁵¹ *Darśan* is more than mere seeing through the external sense of the eye, but seeing through spiritual eye or luminous eye (*ayna shafytha*). Chavara called the first monastery he founded at Mannanam a *darśanaveedu* (house of/for *darśan*). This reminds the ascetics in the *darśanaveedu* that they are called to the higher perfection which is the goal of monastic life.

7.1.4. Awareness of One's Own Sinfulness

The fundamental reason for the compunction of heart is one's awareness of the sinfulness of human nature. Generally, all the saints sustained this awareness throughout their lives. Chavara's awareness of his sinfulness is very intense and we experience it right from the beginning of *Atmanuthapam*:

Omnipotent your will, that me a sinner
 You moulded truly great in your likeness
 O God, despite my limitless unworthiness
 You did show in it, your mercy boundless
 Perfect One, it was your Holy Will
 Impeccable, that let me be born on earth
 A human being, me, impoverished you raised
 To the highest skies, Your Abode.
 A worm creeping on the face of the earth
 You created me from dust of dust
 Granted me a guardian spirit so pure
 That I may dwell on earth in grace and ease. (1.9-20)

Chavara confesses that though God created him in His likeness and image and granted a guardian angel, due to "infinite unworthiness" impoverished and became like "a worm creeping on the face of the earth." God's boundless mercy and love even at one's human unworthiness and sinfulness lead his/her to strive for higher perfection in the spiritual life. Remaining parts of this work, especially the first two cantos, are the descriptions of the theme.

From (at the feet of) his mother he learnt the matters of sublime faith (1.53-54) and up to the age of five he was the beloved to God the Father (1.87). But he is remorseful of his following years (before entering the seminary) where he mixed himself with the non-Christians [Pagans]: "I have indulged in deeds of pagan blindness" (1.97-98) and "mingling free with those my dizzy friends" (1.103). So, according to him "when I grew up my fervour dimmed" (2.25), "my infant piety I gently forsook" (2.26), "I thought and spoke unseemly, unholy words in heedless speech, a profligate life, willowing in vice, plunged in untruth, sore estranged to grace" (2.27-30). He calls himself as "an unrepenting lad I failed to seek heaven's salvage through a contrite heart, a giddy headed lout, woe to me, verily a prodigal son" (2.31-33). These years of living in a non-Christian environment and friends is the main cause of his remorse in

the later years and the main reason of compunction in his whole life. Though the baptismal grace that he had received at his baptism was not lost until his death⁵², the minor offences and childhood follies were reasons of continuous 'godly sadness' on his way to perfection, which further led him to pure and transformative prayer and spirit-filled life (*ruhānūtā*).

When Chavara remembers the numerous blessings he received from God and his ungratefulness to Him, Chavara's heart is filled with repentance and with pain and he craves for God's pardon (2.364). He says: "It pains me deep, on my sins to reflect ..." (4.197-98), "When I recall my sins their sole cause, a fear, horrible, also grips my soul" (7.151-152) and as "the prodigal son I am yearning for mercy" (7.218-19). "When I discover I am but a worm, worse even than they, I tremble with fear and woe" (7.349-50), and "to turn an ascetic, I lack the needed strength ..." (7.365-366). The lack of strength was his strength in God to pursue the path of spiritual transformation and thus he became a model ascetic in the Church of modern times.

7.2. Praying with Tears

Tears may be of repentance with compunction remembering the great mercy of the heavenly father or of joy and happiness in the Spirit, as a symbol of pure prayer. Anyway it is considered the closeness of the person to the Divine in the transformative way to perfection. Many of the confreres of Chavara witnessed him praying with tears. For example, one such eyewitness is Fr Louis of Manjummel, who testifies: "According to the first Constitutions [of 1863], the duration of the evening meditation was one full hour. Fr Prior [Chavara] spent the whole time on knees, absorbed in ecstasy, continually shedding tears ... During the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament it was a delight for others to watch him lost in contemplation."⁵³

⁵² "He could declare before his death that he had never lost the baptismal innocence," wrote his spiritual father, Fr. Leopold Beccaro OCD. Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. by Lucas Vithuvattical CMI, Mannanam: Postulation of the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 2003, 17.

⁵³ *Positio super Introductione Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio concinnata* (Vatican 1977), 561. Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2017, 227-228.

8. Conclusion

Compunction of heart is an ascetic ideal in the ascetic and monastic way of perfection both in the East and in the West. The ascetic and monastic movements were started both in the Egyptian desert and in the Syriac Orient to flee away from the corrupted and corrupting world and to mourn for the sins of the self and of others. Hence, in the Syriac tradition anchorites were called the 'mourners' (*'abīlē*). Kuriakose Elias Chavara is a true ascetic in line with Eastern Christian asceticism. His compunction of heart and tears of repentance reflected in *Atmanuthapam* and in real life as we learn from the witnesses, he could be considered a real ascetic and monk in line with the ascetic and spiritual tradition of the Syriac Orient. Compunction of the heart, one of the significant ascetic ideals of the Eastern Christian spiritual path was the basic and recurring attitude and theme in the life, prayer, and writings of Chavara. It led him further to the pure prayer, heroic practice of the love of God and charity to his fellow beings, and thus became a true ascetic and monk according to the tradition of the Syriac Orient. The above discussion is only an attempt to comprehend the theme of compunction of the soul in Chavara in line with the Eastern Christian ascetic ideal of *penthos*/*'abīlūtā*, which could open the door to further researches on the topic.